Chapter 1

Scene Song: "The Finer Things" ~ Steve Winwood

Morning in Pelmont came in bright and almost offensively beautiful. The sky over Pelmont was a hard, cloudless blue. The orange sun was already up and shining like it had personal business with every window in the neighborhood, and the air had settled into that perfect summer warmth, eighty degrees, soft breeze, palm trees shifting lazily like they had nowhere urgent to be. The kind of morning that usually sent Jimmy Crystal striding toward Sasha's house in one of his tracksuits, already thinking about cereal and Teletubbies and whatever loud opinion he'd have before nine a.m. Today, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal looked like death had called in sick and sent him in its place.

He came up Sasha's walk, draped in a blanket like a fallen king in quarantine. His usual purple tracksuit was on, his rings still flashed on his fingers, his chains still rested against his chest, and his tiara still sat on his head with stubborn, inappropriate dignity, but the rest of him looked absolutely ruined. His platinum-blond hair was mussed rather than styled, his bright blue eyes were dull and glassy, his face was pale except for the fever burning under his skin, and every few steps, he coughed with the miserable force of a man being actively betrayed by his own lungs. He let himself in with Sasha's key and shut the door behind him more slowly than usual.

Normally, Jimmy entered her house as if he'd paid the mortgage and expected applause for it. Today, he shuffled in with his blanket dragging behind him, sniffled once, then stood in the entryway as if even being upright had become a personal insult. The house was quiet, too quiet. No Sasha in the kitchen. No coffee smell. No sound of her moving around upstairs. Jimmy frowned weakly.

"Sash?" he called, his voice rough and thready. "Where are you?"

No answer. He stood there for a second, like maybe she'd appear around the corner with a bowl of cereal and a properly sisterly sense of emergency. When she didn't, he swallowed hard, grimaced at his own sore throat, then started toward the stairs with the tragic determination of a man climbing his own execution scaffold. By the time he made it upstairs, he was breathing through his mouth. He paused in her bedroom doorway and found her exactly where she was supposed to be, asleep in bed, wrapped in her blankets, peaceful and unaware that a royal medical disaster had arrived. Jimmy just stood there looking at her.

Some softer thing moved through his fever-fogged face then, something younger than thirty-six and needier than Sir Lord Jimmy ever liked admitting to. His eyes were half closed. He looked exhausted in a way that had gone past swagger, past vanity, past even irritation. Without a word, Jimmy dragged himself into the room, let the blanket fall off one shoulder, and weakly climbed onto the bed from the bottom like a giant, sick, overdressed puppy. He turned once, winced at the ache in his back, muttered, "For fuck's sake," under his breath,

then curled up at the foot of her bed with the blanket around him and his tiara still on. Within seconds, he was asleep.

Later, sunlight had shifted farther across the room when Sasha stirred. She woke slowly, still soft with sleep, turned her head, and then froze. Jimmy was curled at the bottom of her bed exactly like some tragic little royal stray had broken in and adopted her in the night. For a second, she just stared. Then she sat up, blinked once, and let out a quiet laugh through her nose. She pushed the covers back and climbed out of bed, walking down toward him. He was dead asleep, face half-buried in the blanket, one ringed hand tucked near his cheek, lashes resting against his skin in a way that looked way too flushed. His platinum-blond hair had fallen across his forehead in a messy sweep, and when Sasha reached down and brushed a strand back from his face, her expression changed immediately. Her fingertips touched his forehead. He was burning up. Sasha frowned.

“Jimmy.”

He didn’t move. She touched his forehead again, more firmly this time.

“Jimmy,” she said, sharper now, giving his shoulder a careful shake. “Wake up.”

Jimmy made a small, miserable noise and burrowed deeper into the blanket.

“Jimmy.”

She gave him another shake. This time, he groaned like a man being wrenched back from the grave itself. His face twisted. His eyes cracked open halfway, then squinted shut again against the light.

“What,” he rasped.

Sasha folded her arms.

“You’re burning up.”

Jimmy opened one eye, stared at her for a beat, then shut it again.

“Aye,” he croaked. “I know.”

Sasha’s brow lifted.

“You *know*?”

Jimmy inhaled shakily, then rolled onto his back with all the tragic grandeur of a dying opera villain. He flung one arm over his eyes.

“I’m sick,” he said hoarsely, “properly sick too, not cute sick, not little sniffle sick. I mean cathedral-bells, final-fuckin’-rites sick.”

That made Sasha bite back a smile.

“Jimmy.”

“No, I’m serious,” he said, dragging the arm off his face so he could look at her with feverish offense. “I can feel it. This is the twenty-four-hour bug, but meaner. This is the deluxe edition. My head’s splitting, my throat feels like I swallowed broken glass, my bones ache, my skin’s too hot, then too cold, and I’ve coughed so much I’m fairly certain one of my lungs has filed a complaint.”

Sasha laughed softly despite herself. Jimmy squinted at her with wounded dignity.

“Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“You are absolutely laughin’,” he accused weakly. “I’m lying here in the last stages of biological collapse, and you’re smirkin’ at me like this is entertainment.”

Now she was fully smiling.

“You’re in the afterlife, Jimmy. You’re not dying.”

Jimmy stared at her like she had missed the point on purpose.

“That is not the comfortin’ statement you think it is,” he said. “Because if I’m somehow dyin’ while already dead, that means somethin’ has gone deeply, cosmically wrong. It means I’m gonna end up bein’ the first bastard in history to die twice. There’ll be fuckin’ songs written about it. People’ll gather and say, ‘Aye, there lies Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, felled by chills and mucus.’”

Sasha laughed out loud. Jimmy frowned harder.

“This is humiliatin’,” he said.

“You’re so dramatic,” she said with a faint smile.

“I am exactly dramatic enough,” he muttered, trying to sit up.

The second he did, his whole body rebelled. He sucked in a breath, made a face like every joint had been replaced with broken machinery, and Sasha reached to help him. Jimmy got halfway upright, looked offended by gravity itself, and then, with the full commitment of a Shakespearean martyr, collapsed right onto the floor beside the bed with a loud, wounded groan.

“Ahhh, for fuck’s sake!” he shouted.

Sasha burst out laughing. Jimmy lay there spread out in his tracksuit and blanket, tiara still somehow on, glaring up at the ceiling like it had engineered the fall personally.

“My body has turned against me,” he said miserably. “That was attempted murder.”

"*That*," Sasha said through laughter, "was you refusing to get up like a normal person."

Jimmy turned his head and looked at her from the floor.

"I did get up."

"No, you performed a collapse."

"I'm sick, Sasha. Performance is all I've got."

Still laughing, she bent down and grabbed his arm.

"Come on. Get up."

He made a tremendous show of it, wincing, groaning, dragging his feet, acting like every inch upward was a pilgrimage through suffering.

"If you yank me too hard, I'll come apart in sections."

"You won't come apart in sections," she said.

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do," she replied before laughing.

"You don't," he insisted, finally on his feet and swaying slightly, "my knees feel fictional."

Sasha shook her head, still smiling, and guided him back toward the bed.

"Get in."

Jimmy looked at the bed, then at her.

"I don't want to."

"I know," she said, "but you have to."

"My whole body hurts," he said.

"I know."

"My throat's killin' me."

"I know."

"I'm freezin' while also burnin' alive."

"I know, Jimmy."

He narrowed his eyes.

“And I think that deserves gentleness.”

“Which is why I’m going to give you Tylenol.”

“That’s not the same thing,” he replied.

“Yes, it is, you just don’t realize it,” she said with a smile.

“I swear if you weren’t my fuckin’ sister,” Jimmy muttered under his breath while still letting her steer him into bed.

He climbed in with the reluctant misery of a giant sick child, and with the blanket tucked around him up to his chest. The second his head hit the pillow, he exhaled as if he’d just survived a war. Sasha stood over him with her hands on her hips.

“I’m going downstairs and I’ll be back up with some Tylenol, water, and something for the fever and coughing, okay?”

Jimmy nodded once, his eyes half-lidded. Then, in a smaller voice, suddenly eight years old in a thirty-six-year-old body wrapped in a tracksuit and jewelry, he said:

“…Can I have a grilled cheese?”

Sasha stared at him with a brow raised.

“A grilled cheese.”

“With the crusts off,” Jimmy added, serious as law, “and I want the orange cheese, not that nasty white shite, *and* I want the cheese melted *exactly* half an inch *off* the bread.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Sasha blinked.

“Okay, hold up, Jimmy, how the hell am I supposed to know when the cheese is half an inch melted off the bread?”

Jimmy gave her a tired, offended look.

“You’ll know.”

“*No*, I *won’t*.”

“Yeah, you will,” he responded.

“How?”

He frowned at her, weak and stubborn.

“Uh—I don’t know, maybe because you’re my *sister*?”

Sasha laughed again.

“Now, how in the hell is that an answer?” Sasha replied with a faint frown and a half smile.

“It’s absolutely an answer,” Jimmy mumbled, his voice gravelly with sleep and sickness. “You’ll look at it and just know, and if you really love me, you’ll remove the crusts *with* care and let the cheese hang off the sides in a way that says, ‘Jimmy, I respect your struggle.’”

Sasha laughed harder. Jimmy hilariously pointed weakly at her from under the blanket.

“Stop laughin’ at my specifications.”

“They’re insane.”

“They’re *precise*,” he corrected, “there’s a difference.”

She shook her head with a faint smile.

“You are ridiculous, Jim.”

“*And* sick,” he reminded her, instantly, “*critically* sick, which means you should be nicer to me.”

Sasha smiled and walked toward the door.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Jimmy’s tired eyes widened a little.

“Don’t be long.”

She looked back over her shoulder.

“Why?”

He pulled the blanket higher and swallowed painfully.

“Because…I can already feel this gettin’ worse. In about ten minutes, I’m probably gonna cough up a lung, then I’ll need emergency transport, then they’ll haul me off to some bright white hospital where a smug fuckin’ bastard in gloves cuts me open stem to stern to see what’s gone wrong with my royal insides.”

Sasha laughed so hard she had to lean against the doorframe. Jimmy, offended by her delight, kept going anyway.

“And then they’ll pull out one of my organs and say, ‘Well, there’s your problem, Sir Lord, your spleen’s exhausted.’ And I’ll say, ‘No shite, I’m exhausted too.’”

By then, Sasha was openly cracking up. Jimmy scowled into his pillow.

“*Nooo*, stop laughing at me, this isn’t a joke,” Jimmy whined, trying very hard to sound aggrieved, but laughter kept spilling through his voice anyway.

Sasha laughed.

“Nah, yeah, it is funny, too damn funny,” she said with a smile.

“It’s my tragedy.”

“It’s your flu bug,” she retorted.

Jimmy closed his eyes, sighed weakly, then opened one eye again just enough to look at her.

“Oh…and bring juice too—grape juice with only two cubes of ice.”

Sasha laughed.

“All right, I’ll bring grape juice.”

“And the grilled cheese,” he reminded her.

“Yep.”

“With the crusts off,” he said.

“Right.”

“And the half-inch melt,” he added.

Sasha laughed again.

“I’ll see what I can do, Your Majesty.”

Jimmy gave the faintest, sickest little nod, like that was acceptable.

“Good,” he whispered. “Because if I perish while waitin’, I’ll haunt the shite out of this house.”

Sasha shook her head, smiling all the way out of the room. Behind her, Jimmy pulled the blanket tighter around himself, coughed once, sank deeper into the pillow, and with all the weak solemnity of a feverish child trying to survive the cruelest morning of his very dramatic afterlife, muttered to the empty room:

“Half an inch, Sasha.”

<u>Scene Song: “Fancy” ~ Iggy Azalea</u>

Downstairs, Sasha stood in her kitchen with one hand on her hip and the other holding a spatula over a skillet, staring at a grilled cheese sandwich as if it had just been handed a royal decree.

“Half an inch,” she muttered to herself.

The kitchen was full of summer light. The breeze floated in through the cracked window above the sink, stirring the white curtains. Outside, Pelmont looked ridiculously cheerful, all gold light and rustling palms and bright blue sky, while upstairs Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal was apparently living through the collapse of civilization because of a twenty-four-hour bug. Sasha flipped the sandwich and narrowed her eyes at the cheese spilling out the sides.

“Is that half an inch?” she asked the empty kitchen.

From upstairs came a miserable, muffled cough. Then, faintly:

“Sa-a-sha!”

She closed her eyes and laughed under her breath.

“I’m coming!”

On the counter beside her sat a glass of grape juice, two Tylenol, a bottle of cough syrup, a thermometer, and a damp washcloth she’d run under cool water. She glanced at the medicine, then up toward the ceiling, already preparing herself for the fight that was absolutely coming. Another ragged cough echoed down the stairs. Then Jimmy’s voice again, weak and offended:

“I’m deterioratin’ up here!”

Sasha laughed.

“You’ve been sick for twenty minutes!”

“That’s how fast it happens!”

She slid the sandwich onto a plate, cut the crusts off, and looked at the gooey cheese hanging over one side.

“…Close enough,” she declared.

She arranged everything on a tray, grabbed it, and headed upstairs. By the time she got back to her bedroom, Jimmy had managed to scoot himself higher under the blanket, but only barely. He was on his back now, tiara still crooked on his platinum blond head like even illness couldn’t separate him from his own madness. One arm was thrown over his eyes, and the other rested dramatically across his stomach. He looked like a Victorian child in a painting called *The Young Duke’s Final Fever*. He moved the second he heard her come in.

“Took your sweet fuckin’ time,” he croaked.

Sasha walked in and set the tray down on the nightstand.

“You’re still alive, I see.”

“Barely,” he replied

He removed his arm from over his face and peered blearily at the tray. His bright blue eyes immediately locked onto the plate.

“The sandwich.”

“The sandwich,” Sasha confirmed.

Jimmy pushed himself up on his elbows with a soft, miserable grunt, then leaned over to inspect it with the seriousness of a jeweler examining a diamond. Sasha folded her arms.

“Well?”

Jimmy stared at the grilled cheese for a long beat, his eyes narrowed. Then he pointed weakly.

“That side’s good.”

Sasha barked out a laugh.

“I swear you’re unbelievable.”

“The left side,” he rasped, still scrutinizing it, “has achieved emotional understanding. The right side’s a little conservative, but I can work with it.”

“You are hilarious in more ways than one.”

Jimmy ignored that and slumped back against the pillows.

“I need tea as well.”

“You asked for juice.”

He looked personally wounded.

“Juice is for children.”

“Well, I mean, you *are* acting eight,” she replied.

“That’s slander,” he responded with a faint frown.

“Nope, that’s an observation,” she responded.

Jimmy coughed into his hands, winced, and then looked at the tray again. His gaze drifted from the sandwich to the Tylenol and the cough syrup bottle. His expression darkened immediately.

“No.”

Sasha sat on the edge of the bed.

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Yeah.”

“No, I’ll take the sandwich,” he said, pointing at it with frail dignity, “but *that* bottle of poison can get directly fucked.”

“It’s cough syrup, Jimmy.”

“It smells like shite from a fuckin’ toilet.”

“Come on, you haven’t even opened it.”

“I don’t have to, I can sense evil,” Jimmy muttered.

Sasha picked up the thermometer.

“Open your mouth.”

Jimmy stared at her with a brow raised.

“That thing’s humiliatin.’”

“It’s a thermometer.”

“It’s an accusation.”

“*Jimmy*.”

He sighed the sigh of the unjustly persecuted and opened his mouth. Sasha slipped the thermometer under his tongue. Jimmy glared at her the whole time. His brows were knit. His face was flushed. His platinum blond hair was a complete mess, flattened on one side from sleep, and with the blanket up to his chest, and his rings catching in the sunlight. Sasha waited, amused. Jimmy glared harder. Then the thermometer beeped. She took it out, looked at the number, and her brows lifted.

“You’ve got a fever.”

Jimmy threw both hands up weakly.

“There!” Jimmy exclaimed. “There it is! *Proof*! Scientific proof that I’m in medical peril!”

“Would you quit with the dramatics?” she said with an amused smile. “You’re *not* in medical peril.”

“One hundred point whatever is absolutely peril.”

“It’s one hundred point four.”

Jimmy stared with raised brows.

“One hundred point four? That’s practically one hundred and fuckin’ dead.”

Sasha laughed and set the thermometer aside.

“Chill, Jimmy, it’s a fever, not a coronation for plague.”

Jimmy gave her a disgusted look.

“I’m tellin’ you now, if this climbs any higher, I’ll start seein’ ghosts.”

“Well, you’re literally in the afterlife, so….”

“That’s different, and you know it,” he responded.

She handed him the Tylenol and the glass of orange juice.

“Take these.”

Jimmy looked at the pills in his palm like they’d insulted his bloodline.

“Shite, these are huge.”

“Oh damn, here you go *again*, no, they’re *not*, you goofball,” Sasha said with an amused smile and a faint frown.

“They are to a man in my condition.”

Sasha just stared with her brow raised. Jimmy looked from the pills to her, to the pills again. Then, with all the solemn misery of a condemned prisoner, he tossed them into his mouth and swallowed them with juice. He coughed a few times after, his face twisting.

“Damn, that was violent,” he said.

“It was Tylenol,” she replied.

“It scraped my soul on the way down,” he said.

“Okay. Now the cough syrup.”

Jimmy froze.

“No.”

Sasha picked up the bottle and unscrewed the cap.

"*Yeah*, now come on."

The smell hit the air. Jimmy recoiled so fast he nearly slid back down the bed.

"Fuckin' hell, what the fuck *is* that?!"

Sasha laughed so hard she had to put the measuring cup down for a second.

"It's cherry."

"No, no, that's not cherry, that's fuckin' melted devil."

"Overdramatizing again, huh?" Sasha said, with a faint frown and a half-smile.

"Sasha, it smells like somebody liquefied a tire and whispered fuckin' fruit near it. I see why Remmick didn't want to drink that shite."

Sasha was openly laughing now as she poured the dose. Jimmy quickly pulled the blanket up over his head, covering his head completely, as if it could protect him from medicine.

"Noooo! I don't *want* it!" Jimmy said in a hilarious, temper tantrum tone of voice.

Sasha laughed.

"Come on, Jimmy, you need it to feel better."

"I'd rather cough!"

Sasha took the blanket off his head and held the little cup out to him. Jimmy looked at it with naked suspicion. Then he looked at her, then back at the cup.

"Be honest with me," he said hoarsely. "If I drink that, am I gonna remember my own name afterward?"

Sasha laughed.

"Yeah, Jimmy, damn, it's not like it's Jim Jones' Flavoraid."

Jimmy frowned at her, confused.

"Jim Jones, who's he?"

Sasha laughed and shook her head with a brief close of her eyes.

"Never mind," Sasha replied.

"Will I still respect myself if I drink this shite?"

"No," Sasha said instantly.

He gave her a weak, scandalized glare.

“Sasha.”

“Boy, *drink* the damn medicine already,” she said before lightly laughing.

He took the little cup between two ringed fingers as if it were radioactive. He lifted it to his face, sniffed once, made a revolted sound straight from the bottom of his soul, and looked ready to argue again. Sasha lifted one eyebrow. Jimmy closed his eyes and shot it back. There was a beat. Then his whole face collapsed in horror.

“Oh, that is fuckin’ foul,” he whispered.

Sasha laughed. Jimmy briefly clapped a hand over his mouth, swallowed hard, and stared at the middle distance as he’d just glimpsed the machinery of hell.

“That’s not medicine,” he said at last, voice wrecked with betrayal. “That’s a war crime in syrup form.”

Sasha took the cup from him, still laughing.

“Here, now drink some of your juice.”

Jimmy grabbed the grape juice and gulped half the glass like a man flushing poison from his system. When he was done, he looked at her with watering eyes and deep offense.

“You let me do that,” he said.

“Yep, I did.”

“You watched it happen,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“You’re supposed to protect me,” he said.

“I *am* protecting you.”

“That was an assassination attempt,” he said.

With a faint smile, Sasha shook her head and picked up the washcloth.

“Come here.”

Jimmy eyed it suspiciously.

“What now?”

She gently laid the cool cloth across his forehead. He went still. The change in him was immediate. His face softened. His shoulders dropped. He closed his eyes, and for a second, all the ridiculousness drained out of him, leaving only a tired, overheated man who clearly felt awful. Sasha’s expression softened, too.

“There,” she said quietly. “Better?”

Jimmy swallowed, then gave the smallest nod.

“…Yeah.”

The answer came out less swaggering than usual, a little rougher, a little younger. Sasha watched him for a second. Then Jimmy opened one eye and pointed weakly at the sandwich.

“I’ve suffered enough. Hand it over.”

That made her laugh again. She lifted the plate and passed it to him. Jimmy took the grilled cheese in both hands like it was sacred, then stared at it one more time before taking a bite. The second the warm cheese hit his tongue, his face nearly went emotional. He chewed slowly, swallowed, and then looked down at the sandwich, then up at Sasha.

“*This*,” he rasped, “is extraordinary.”

“Is it?” Sasha asked with a smile.

He nodded once, grave and sincere.

“The crust removal’s immaculate. The melt is nearly spiritual.”

“*Nearly*?” she responded.

“The right side still lacks confidence.”

Sasha laughed and shoved his shoulder lightly. Jimmy actually smiled, just a little, sick and sleepy and very pleased with himself. He took another bite, slower this time, and settled back into the pillows with the washcloth on his forehead and the sandwich in hand like he was finally beginning to forgive the world for what it had done to him. After a minute, Sasha reached for the remote on her nightstand.

“What do you want on TV?”

Jimmy didn’t even hesitate.

“Teletummies.”

“Of course,” she said with a smile.

She turned it on, and the cheerful nonsense of it filled the room. Jimmy, feverish and wrapped in blankets, watched in total silence for a few seconds while chewing his grilled cheese. Then he pointed faintly at the screen.

“See?” he murmured. “This is educational.”

“Educational,” Sasha said before laughing with a single nod.

“Aye,” he responded, “this show teaches colors, shapes, suspicion.”

“Suspicion?”

Jimmy took another bite and gave the screen a sleepy nod.

“There’s somethin’ fuckin’ off about that baby sun,” he said.

Sasha laughed again, quieter now. He kept eating, slower with his eyes half-lidded, blanket tucked around him, tiara still slightly crooked. The fever still had him flushed, and every now and then he’d cough, or wince, or sniffle like he’d been personally wronged by biology, but he was calmer now. Fed, medicated, cool cloth on his forehead, sister beside him. A few minutes passed. Then, without looking at her, Jimmy said in a low, scratchy voice:

“Thank you, Sasha.”

Sasha turned. He still had his eyes on the television, expression tired and stubborn, like even gratitude had to be dragged out of him against his will.

“For the sandwich,” he added. “And…all the other shite.”

Sasha smiled.

“You’re welcome, baby bro.”

Jimmy nodded once as if that settled it, took one more bite of grilled cheese, then mumbled:

“If I survive this, I want it on record that I was very brave.”

Sasha leaned back against the headboard, laughing softly.

“I’ll notify the kingdom.”

Jimmy gave the faintest smirk.

“Good.”

Then he sank a little farther into the pillows, his eyes fixed on Teletubbies and with him looking every inch the feverish, overdramatic, absurd little brother he’d apparently reverted into for the day. And after a moment, in a voice barely above a whisper, he muttered toward the TV:

“That sun baby’s still dodgy as fuck.”

Chapter 2

Scene Song: "Night Time" ~ Honey, I Shrunk The Kids Soundtrack

A little while later, upstairs had gone quiet, *too* quiet. The Tylenol had started doing its job. The cough syrup had begun its work. The fever was still there, still burning under Jimmy's skin, but now it had softened him around the edges too, blurred him slightly, made the room feel farther away than it was. He had finished the grilled cheese, watched enough Teletubbies to start blinking slowly at the screen, and then Sasha, satisfied he was finally settling, had gone downstairs to let him sleep. That had lasted maybe thirty minutes.

Now Sasha sat curled at one end of the sofa in the living room, the television on low, sunlight still pouring warm and gold through the windows. Outside, Pelmont was bright and ridiculous as ever, palms moving in the breeze, sky wide and blue, the whole world looking like a postcard while upstairs Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal was apparently losing a battle against solitude. Then she heard it. From the staircase came the slow, dragging sound of someone descending one tragic step at a time. Sasha frowned and turned her head.

A second later, Jimmy appeared. He looked absolutely pitiful. The blanket was wrapped around him like a royal cape of suffering. His tracksuit was still on, his chains still around his neck, his rings still on his fingers, and his tiara still sat crooked on his platinum blond hair like it had survived a shipwreck. His face was flushed with fever, his eyes half-lidded and heavy, and he looked so weak and sleepy he seemed to be moving mostly out of stubbornness and sibling attachment. He stood there for a second at the bottom of the stairs, swaying slightly. Then, in a rough, plaintive little voice that was so ridiculous it nearly qualified as a crime, he whined:

"...Saaasha."

Sasha's whole face changed at once. Her brow pulled together, concern rising fast. She sat forward on the sofa.

"Jimmy, what the hell are you doing out of bed?"

Jimmy blinked at her like the answer should've been obvious.

"I came down."

"Yeah, I can see that," Sasha said, already getting up. "Why are you out of bed?"

Jimmy shuffled toward the living room with the blanket, dragging and one hand trailing weakly along the wall for support, as if he were crossing a desert instead of twelve feet of hardwood floor.

"Because," he said hoarsely, "I got lonely."

Sasha stopped. That hit her harder than she expected. Jimmy kept coming, mouth turned down, and his eyes dull with fever and medicine and mild self-pity. He looked about ninety percent man, ten percent little boy. By the time he reached the sofa, he let out a miserable exhale that sounded almost offended by life itself.

“Sasha,” he said again, quieter now, “it was too quiet up there.”

Before she could answer, he dropped heavily down onto the sofa beside her with all the dramatic weariness of a Victorian invalid. Then, moving with sleepy determination, he grabbed one of the throw pillows, shoved it onto her lap, and promptly lowered his head onto it like he had every right in the world. And then, as if that still wasn’t enough, he gathered the blanket around himself, curled closer, and snuggled in against her. Sasha stared down at him, one brow lifted, not annoyed, and not at all, deeply concerned.

“Jimmy.”

He made a soft sound and burrowed a little more into the pillow on her lap.

“No.”

“No?” she frowned with a brow raised.

“I’m already here,” he mumbled into the pillow. “So no.”

Sasha looked at him in disbelief.

“Nah, see, you gotta go back upstairs and get in bed, Jimmy, seriously.”

That got his eyes open. He turned a little onto his back and looked up at her with sudden, sleepy irritation.

“Why?”

“Because you’re sick.”

“So?”

“*So* you need to be in bed.”

Jimmy frowned hard, almost angrily, like this was the dumbest thing he’d heard all day.

“I’m on a softer bed now.”

Sasha lightly laughed with a shake of her head.

“Jimmy, this is a sofa.”

“It’s horizontal enough.”

“Nah, see no, you got me—nah, you not sleeping here, bro.”

“Yeah, right, watch me,” he said before turning back over on his side with his back to her.

He started to close his eyes again. Sasha touched his shoulder, smiling.

“Jimmy.”

He sighed through his nose, opened his eyes, and once again turned a little onto his back and looked up at her with feverish offense.

“*What*?”

“You’re burning up, you’re exhausted, you’ve got chills, body aches, and a cough that sounds like it’s trying to file legal action. You need to be upstairs in bed resting properly.”

For a second, he just stared at her. Then his face changed. The irritation melted. The swagger slipped. The edge came off him all at once, leaving something softer and younger underneath. He looked away from her and up at the ceiling.

“I don’t want to stay up there,” he said, his voice dropping.

Sasha’s expression softened. Jimmy swallowed and tugged the blanket a little tighter around himself.

“I want to be with my sister,” he said, quiet and almost completely childlike. “I missed you. You’re like my security blanket.”

That statement went straight through her. Sasha’s face softened so completely it was almost painful to look at. For a beat, she just stared down at him, this feverish, dramatic little brother in a tracksuit and tiara, lying his head on her lap like he’d crossed an ocean to get there. Then she let out the tiniest breath and gently smoothed a hand over his platinum blond hair.

“Well,” she said with a smile, “you’re lucky that what you said was sweet or else I’d kick you off this sofa within the snap of a finger.”

Jimmy and Sasha laughed.

“You should let me stay,” he said with a childish smile.

Sasha laughed.

“Wait, so that’s your strategy?” she asked.

“It’s a good one.”

“It’s manipulative,” Sasha said with a faint smile.

“It’s emotionally honest,” he muttered.

“It’s both,” she answered.

Jimmy considered that, then gave a tiny nod, *like, fine, maybe both*. Sasha still looked worried.

“You still shouldn’t have come downstairs by yourself.”

Jimmy’s eyes drifted shut again.

“I survived it.”

“You nearly fell asleep on the stairs.”

He turned back on his side again with his back to her and stared at the television.

“No, I was pacing myself.”

“You were clinging to the wall.”

“That was Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal *style*,” he said, with a faint frown and a half smile, which made her laugh, and within seconds, he was laughing with her.

Right then, Jimmy went into a severe coughing spell. It hit hard and suddenly, bending him forward. He dragged the blanket up toward his mouth, coughing into it, and winced at the scrape in his throat. Immediately, Sasha’s hand went to his back, patting it softly.

“Damn, easy, bro,” Sasha said.

After the coughing subsided, he then slumped heavily back onto the pillow, exhausted by the effort.

“…That was brutal,” he said in a low, weak, raspy voice.

“I know,” she responded.

He shut his eyes and breathed through his mouth for a second. The cough syrup was really getting hold of him now, making him slower, loopier, more dramatic in a different way, like every thought had to swim through syrup before reaching his mouth. The TV flickered in front of them. Jimmy sighed. A whole minute passed in silence. Then, very seriously, with his eyes still closed, he said:

“I think I’m smaller.”

Sasha blinked.

“What?”

Jimmy opened his eyes, turned slightly onto his back again, and looked up at her.

“I think the flu’s shrunk me.”

She stared with raised brows.

“It’s done what?”

“Shrunk me,” he repeated, like she was being dense. “Look at me. I feel shorter.”

Sasha let out a surprised laugh.

“Please, you are not shorter.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

Jimmy frowned weakly.

“My legs feel short.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Aye, it absolutely is.”

He lifted one hand from under the blanket and vaguely gestured toward himself.

“Earlier, I was a full-sized man. Now I’m at least three feet less powerful.”

Sasha laughed. Jimmy squinted at her, wounded.

“This is exactly the kind of mockery history remembers.”

“Yeah, right, no one is writing history about your flu, Jimmy.”

“They should,” he murmured. “This is heroic.”

She laughed again. He turned with his back to her again and then blinked slowly at the television. The cough syrup had his timing all off now. His bright blue eyes kept fixing on the screen with strange intensity, then drifting away like he’d forgotten what he was doing. After a few seconds, he spoke again.

“Why’s that lamp breathing?”

Sasha froze. Then she turned and looked at the lamp in the corner. The lamp, to its credit, was not breathing. She turned back slowly and shook her head with a faint smile.

“Jimmy.”

He pointed weakly toward it from under the blanket.

“It is,” he said, “subtle, but I’ve noticed.”

“That lamp is not breathing for fuck’s sake,” she said, smiling.

Jimmy narrowed his eyes at it.

“Well. It’s got an attitude then.”

Sasha laughed. A laugh tried to creep into his own mouth, too, but he fought it weakly.

“Nooo, see, you keep laughing, trying to make me laugh,” he whined, trying very hard to sound aggrieved, but laughter kept spilling through his voice anyway.

That only made Sasha laugh harder. Jimmy shut his eyes with sick, floppy dignity.

“You’re bein’ *very* unsupportive to a man under pharmaceutical siege.”

“What? Bro, please, you took *one* dose of cough syrup.”

“And it was malicious,” he said.

A few beats later, he cracked one eye open.

“If I fall asleep down here, you’re not allowed to move me,” he said.

Sasha smiled faintly.

“We’ll see.”

“No, no ‘we’ll see,’” he mumbled. “I’m serious. I’ve found my place now.”

“*Your* place?”

“Aye.” He squinted sleepily. “This is medically best.”

“According to who?”

“Me,” he replied.

“Yeah, right, like that’s a medical authority,” she said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Jimmy let out a tiny scoff.

“I know my own tragic body.”

Then he said with drowsy conviction:

“Besides, if I stay near you, I’ll recover faster.”

Sasha laughed softly.

“That’s not how viruses work.”

“It is in Pelmont.”

“That’s not how anything works,” she said.

He thought about that for a second. Then said:

“Well, it should.”

His eyelids drooped again. The room went quiet except for the soft television noise and the occasional rustle of palm fronds outside. Sasha kept one hand resting lightly on his head and another tucked near the blanket over his shoulder. Then Jimmy stirred again.

“Sasha?”

“Yeah?”

“If I pass away on this sofa…”

She closed her eyes and lightly laughed.

“Jimmy.”

“…bury me in this tracksuit.”

Sasha burst out laughing.

“Jimmy, you aren’t dying.”

“And put my rings on properly,” he continued, his voice fading sleepier with every word, “none of that sloppy arrangement shite. And tell people I was brave.”

“I’ll tell them you were ridiculous.”

“No,” he whispered, his eyes closed now, “brave, heroic, beautiful under pressure.”

Sasha shook her head, smiling helplessly.

“Anything else, Your Majesty?”

Jimmy was quiet for a moment. Then, almost asleep, he added:

“Say that the lamp forgives me.”

Sasha stared at him with a faint frown and a half smile.

“The *lamp*?”

“Aye.”

“For what?”

He frowned faintly without opening his eyes.

“I don’t know. It just feels tense.”

Sasha laughed. Jimmy heard her and gave the faintest sleepy protest, barely forming the words.

“Don’t laugh.”

But he was smiling too now, just barely, the smile of someone too medicated and exhausted to keep up a proper grudge. Sasha’s laughter gentled. She looked down at him, at the fever flush still on his cheeks, the tiara still crooked, the blanket tucked around him, the way even in all his hilarious Sir Lord glory, he looked so heartbreakingly young when he was sick and tired. Her expression softened.

“The lamp forgives you, kiddo,” she said quietly.

Jimmy gave the smallest, most satisfied little nod, with a faint, brief half-smile.

“Knew it.”

And that, apparently, settled the matter. A few minutes later, his breathing changed. It slowed and evened out. His face softened into sleep, all the overdramatic nonsense draining off him. Now, he was just Jimmy: warm, sleepy, and curled up with his head in his sister’s lap, like that was where he had always meant to land. Sasha looked down at him for a long moment. Then she adjusted the blanket more securely around his shoulders, careful not to wake him. The television flickered on, and the golden summer light of Pelmont held them both. Half asleep now, right on the edge of dreaming, Jimmy mumbled one last thing into the pillow.

“…Don’t let the lamp watch me sleep.”

Sasha bit her lip to keep from laughing again.

“Yeah, I won’t,” Sasha promised.

And with that, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, conqueror of absolutely nothing that day except one grilled cheese and half a bottle cap of cough syrup, finally fell asleep for real.

Scene Song: “Arthur Theme (Christopher Cross) ~ Instrumental”

Several hours later, the house had shifted into the evening. The bright gold of the afternoon had mellowed into a softer, honey-colored light that poured through Sasha’s windows and warmed the counters, the floor, the edges of the furniture. The air still carried the sweetness of summer in Pelmont, but inside the house, a new smell now, rich and savory and impossible to ignore, wafted: *pizza*. Sasha stood in the kitchen, one hand wrapped in an oven mitt as she pulled a supreme pizza from the oven. The cheese bubbled and hissed softly. The scent of pepperoni, sausage, peppers, onions, and toasted crust filled the whole downstairs like a promise. Up until that moment, Jimmy had still been asleep on the sofa, but then the smell hit him.

A minute later, soft footsteps shuffled into the kitchen. Sasha had just set the pizza down when she heard him and turned, startled. Jimmy stood in the doorway in his tracksuit. His platinum blond hair was tousled from sleep, tiara still on his head, now sitting even more crooked. The blanket had been left behind. His face had lost the feverish, miserable flush. Though he still looked a little wrung out and had an occasional cough in his chest, he looked much more alive. His eyes widened at the sight in front of him. His whole face lit up with the most childish, delighted smile.

“You made pizza!”

Sasha blinked, half relieved and half surprised.

“I thought you were asleep.”

Jimmy briefly frowned faintly, like sleep had become secondary the moment pizza entered the chat.

“I was,” he said, his voice still a little rough but much stronger now. “Then I smelled greatness.”

Sasha laughed softly at his words.

“What are you doing up?”

Jimmy wandered over toward the island and sat down on one of the stools with the satisfied heaviness of a man returning from war.

“I feel better,” he said, nodding once like he was presenting clinical findings. “Still got the cough, but the fever, body aches, and chills are gone, my throat doesn’t feel like broken glass anymore, and I no longer believe I’m moments away from a medically historic death.”

Sasha laughed and then smiled and nodded.

“That’s good,” she responded.

Jimmy nodded back, pleased with himself, then pushed off the stool and got to his feet. He went toward the pizza with very clear intentions, reached out for a slice, and immediately got his hand smacked away, not hard, just enough. Jimmy jerked his hand back and frowned at her in offended disbelief.

“Hey!” Jimmy exclaimed. “ I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, but you smell like sweat and Vicks,” Sasha retorted, half smiling.

Jimmy stared at her. Sasha folded her arms.

“You’re not eating anything until you use the guest bathroom and take a bath.”

He looked scandalized.

“A *bath*?”

“Yeah, a bath.”

“Sasha, why the fuck do I need a bath before pizza?”

“Because you smell like a fever broke. So you aren’t getting anything to eat until you bathe first.”

Jimmy looked down at himself, then back at her. He took a cautious little sniff at his shoulder. His face twisted.

“…That’s hostile.”

Sasha laughed. Jimmy sucked his teeth and slumped dramatically where he stood, full minor-tantrum mode engaged now that he was feeling well enough to be difficult again.

“I’ve risen from illness,” he muttered. “I’ve survived pharmaceutical torture, respiratory collapse, and the breathing lamp downstairs, and now you’re denyin’ me pizza at the final gate.”

She laughed.

“You’ll survive ten more minutes.”

Jimmy shot her a look so deeply aggrieved it deserved framing.

“This is how trust erodes,” he said.

Sasha laughed harder. Jimmy mumbled something under his breath as he turned away, the words just loud enough to catch.

“Cruel, tyrannical sister with a pizza hostage situation…”

“What was that?” Sasha called, her tone teasing as she smiled.

He kept walking toward the stairs, waving one ringed hand in the air with limp, irritated elegance.

“I said,” he called over his shoulder, “this pizza better be transcendently fuckin’ good if I’ve got to bathe for the privilege of a slice.”

Sasha laughed and shook her head as he disappeared upstairs. Later, from the guest bathroom, came the unmistakable sound of wild splashing and loud laughter that bounced down the hall and into the kitchen. Sasha froze halfway through cutting the pizza, then heard Jimmy laugh again, bright and ridiculous. She stared toward the ceiling.

“What in the hell…”

She set the pizza cutter down and headed upstairs. By the time she got to the guest bathroom door, she could hear him still laughing inside, splashing around like a child left unsupervised. Sasha paused outside, shook her head once, then pushed the door open with her eyes closed.

“What are you doing?” Sasha demanded from the doorway, voice exasperated. “I can hear you all the way downstairs laughing like you’re watching Bernie Mac live.”

Inside the tub, Jimmy stopped splashing for a second and looked at her with confusion. He was buried under an absurd amount of bubbles—mountains of them. A ridiculous white cloud swallowed the entire bathtub, with only his head, shoulders, and the occasional ringed hand emerging from the foam, like artifacts in a bath-based archaeological dig. His brow furrowed.

“Sasha, why are your eyes closed?”

Sasha laughed and opened them but looked away from him.

“Because you’re my brother in a bathtub with no clothes on, Jimmy,” Sasha replied dryly. “And I don’t care how many bubbles you’ve got in there, I’m not taking chances, o-kay?”

Jimmy laughed with a shake of his head.

“In fact, you know what?” Sasha said. “For some reason, the image of you in a bathtub full of bubbles reminds me of Dudley Moore in *Arthur*.”

Sasha laughed, and Jimmy blinked at her. Then he frowned in exactly that Jimmy way, half insulted and half genuinely curious.

“Who’s Dudley Moore in *Arthur*?”

Sasha laughed again at the way he phrased it.

“Never mind,” she said, waving the joke away.

“No, *now* I want to know who Dudley Moore is in *Arthur*, tell me,” Jimmy said with a curious smile.

“Nah, it doesn’t matter.”

“No, because it clearly mattered enough for you to say it,” Jimmy said, still smiling with a brow raised.

Sasha shook her head, her smile lingering.

“Forget it. What are you laughing at so hard?”

Jimmy looked down at the bubbles, as if the answer were self-evident.

“I’m havin’ bubble fun.”

Sasha stared at him with a confused frown.

“Bubble fun?”

“Aye.”

She folded her arms.

“What in the hell is bubble fun?”

Jimmy’s expression turned serious, like he was about to explain an ancient and noble art.

“Bubble fun,” he said, lifting both hands out of the foam and letting bubbles slide dramatically down his wrists, “is when you’re sittin’ in glorious hot water, properly healed, and you start flingin’ the bubbles about because they’ve got attitude and need managin’.”

Sasha laughed. Jimmy kept going, fully committed now.

“You splash a bit. You build bubble architecture. You make a beard out of foam if you’re feelin’ cultured. Sometimes you create a mountain, only to destroy it. It’s therapeutic. It’s majestic. It’s science.”

Sasha laughed again.

“Yeah, that is definitely not science,” Sasha replied with a crooked smile.

“It absolutely is,” he said with a faint frown and a half smile of his own.

He scooped up a mound of bubbles and slapped them gently onto the rim of the tub.

“Look at that!” he said with a full, excited smile.

Sasha peered at it, one of her brows raised.

“At what?”

“*That*!” Jimmy said, still smiling, “that’s a fuckin’ fortress!”

She laughed hard. Jimmy, pleased with himself, leaned back into the tub and sent another spray of water sloshing softly against the side.

“See? Bubble fun,” he said with a smile.

Sasha shook her head, smiling helplessly.

“Whatever. Just get finished soon. Dinner’s ready, and Remmick and Sammy are coming over.”

Jimmy’s face changed immediately. He raised one brow.

“Not Stack?”

Sasha blinked.

“No. Why?”

Jimmy looked sincerely disappointed.

“Stack’s more fun.”

That made Sasha’s whole expression melt into this amused, warm, proud-sister smile.

“Aww,” she said. “You’ve become friends with Stack. You’re adorable.”

Jimmy’s face soured at once.

“Sasha—*don’t*.”

Sasha laughed lightly.

“What? Don’t what?”

“Don’t say adorable,” he said, still with a sour face.

“Hey, you’ll *always* be adorable to me, you’re my baby brother,” she said with a faint smile.

Jimmy faintly smiled before looking away with a light laugh.

“Well….okay,” he said with a shrug, “but still—don’t say that type of shite out loud.”

Sasha laughed.

“And, well….he’s become my friend,” he said. “Stack’s like a milder Black version of me. Less ceremonial, but still quality fuckin’ company. He’s a fun time.”

Sasha laughed.

“You should’ve invited him. He’s got range,” he asked.

Sasha was still smiling as she stepped back toward the door, her tone light.

“I’ll go over to your house and bring you some fresh clothes,” she called, “finish your bath.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes while lightly laughing and shaking his head.

“Aye, aye, bath police,” he joked.

“Jimmy.”

“I’m bathing.”

“You’re negotiating with foam.”

“Yeah, that’s part of the process.”

Sasha laughed again and turned to leave. As she walked out, Jimmy muttered to himself and resumed poking at the bubbles with one finger.

“So now I’ve got to sit through dinner with boring Irish Remmick and Sammy, the smilin’ monk of very few fuckin’ words,” he said, his voice slipping into that low, theatrical grumble he used when he wanted the room to know he’d been wronged.

Sasha stopped in the hall, laughing all over again. Jimmy heard her and called after her without looking up.

“I meant what I said,” he said.

“I know you did,” she called back.

He huffed once, then gathered a fresh pile of bubbles into his hands, stared at it with grave consideration, and muttered to himself:

“For fuck’s sake. Fine. I’ll carry the conversation, as usual.”

Then, with all the solemn dignity of Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, conqueror of fever, survivor of cough syrup, and reigning emperor of bubble fun, he flicked the bubbles into the air and went right back to playing.